

Arizona Legislature fails to support a secure water future

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By GARY BEVERLY, PH.D

Arizona News – Our water supply in Arizona is like a leaky ship attempting to sail into the future. Its captain — our state Legislature — is ignoring the leaks and, through inaction, is jeopardizing the future of our region and the entire state. However, our area's Senator Ken Bennett and Representative Selena Bliss have supported legislation to address some of the problems in this last session, only to run into roadblocks.

Both of Arizona's main sources of water supporting the state's dramatic growth have limits. We've heard how Colorado River supplies are diminishing, but what is most important to us is that the groundwater stored in our aquifers is steadily declining. Meanwhile, state laws and regulations continue to allow more growth and inefficient groundwater use.

The current session demonstrates the Legislature's failure to act to repair this leaky ship. Bills to fix the holes in the state's management of our water have been proposed and then squelched during the legislative process because a single legislator, the chairwoman of the Natural Resources, Energy, and Water Committee, has effectively blocked discussion and prevented a vote.

One bill, for example, was aimed at giving rural Arizona watersheds outside of Active Management Areas (AMAs) the authority to manage groundwater supplies to avoid draining aquifers. This bill was blocked.

Another bill, proposed by Rep. Selena Bliss, sought to make new rental home subdivisions follow the same rules that apply to new home-ownership residential subdivisions. Unfortunately, this bill was also blocked.

Yet another bill attempted to reduce the threats to rivers and streams. Because you can't manage what isn't measured, another bill required large wells outside of AMAs to report their pumping. This bill too was blocked without discussion.

The list goes on. Irresponsibly, most Arizona legislators are demonstrating their priorities for water management. They support growth instead of needed measures to assure a secure water future. And they ignore rural and northern Arizona, including the Quad Cities region, which depend on dwindling groundwater supplies.

Sen. Bennett and Rep. Bliss are to be commended for their efforts to support legislative solutions. But we need to do more. We should ask our representatives to continue to educate their colleagues in the Legislature. We should demand that bills receive a hearing and a vote. Most importantly, we should insist that the Legislature modernize Arizona water law to better manage the use of our increasingly scarce groundwater. And the Legislature should recognize the unmet water needs throughout northern Arizona.

Closer to home, our local elected officials must begin to plan together. Instead of competing for groundwater, officials must be willing to change their water policies and find creative and cooperative regional solutions to manage development and improve water conservation. Failure to plan will create consequences that will be borne by future generations and degrade natural resources like the upper Verde River.

Let's start the conversation. Join the Citizens Water Advocacy Group (CWAG) on Saturday, Apr. 8 at 10 a.m. for a Legislative Roundup discussion with Sen. Ken Bennett and Rep. Selena Bliss via Zoom. For more info and to register, see "Next Event" at www.cwagaz.org .

Gary Beverly is a member of the CWAG Executive Committee and a retired business owner working to protect the Verde River.